Helvetica
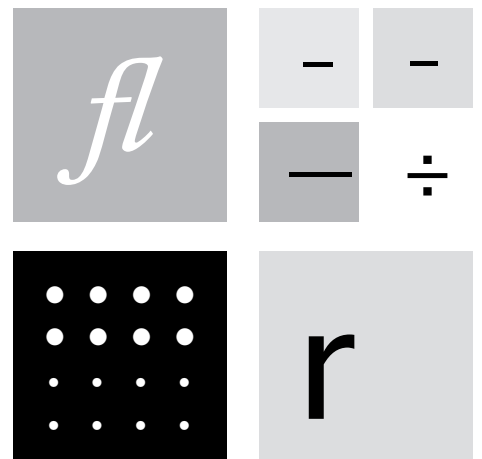
Complements & Alternatives

Part 1: Complements

Combining Type With Helvetica

Introduction

We asked experts we admire to round up typefaces that share a common use, style, or concept. Indra Kupferschmid is a German typographer and writer who lives in Bonn and teaches in Saarbrücken at the French border. As co-author of "Helvetica forever", Indra is often asked what typeface to combine with the world's most famous font. As Indra puts it, "Helvetica is often described as the tasteless white rice among typefaces: satisfies easily, cheap and fast. But the good thing is, you can take the design into different directions with the sauce and side dishes (the typefaces you pair with Helvetica)."

Indra shares her favorite Helvetica companions with the following guidelines in mind: "Focusing on contrast makes combining fonts easier. Better not pair Helvetica (or other Neo-Grotesques) with another sans serif (like a Humanist Sans). Instead, choose a serif or a slab. Transitional and Modern (bracketed) serifs work quite well with Helvetica. So do most Garaldes like Garamond — it all depends on what kind of atmosphere you're aiming for. Browse the list of ideas below, or look for faces with broad proportions, a large x-height, or similar characteristics, like an uppercase 'R' with a vertical tail."

Neutral Fonts

If you're looking for a text face and want to stay consistent by emphasizing the neutral, flawless feel of the Grotesk, try a Transitional serif. As their name suggests, these even, regularly proportioned typefaces "sit on the fence" — neither too playful nor too aloof.

NEW AMERICAN GUIDE TO BIRD CONSERVATION

LC   3°

The Skylark

This is not an American bird. I have allowed his picture and placed here because so many of our English friends

Location

Western
(non-native)

Length
16–18 mm

The skylark is probably the most r birds in Europe. He is found in all tries of Europe, but England seem Here it stays during the summer, a south in the winter.

Arnhem

Designed by Fred Smeijers for a Dutch newspaper, Arnhem's strong color lets it perform very well at small sizes and in less than optimal printing conditions.

Wax & Oil Print
lithograph

FF Clifford

Peaked Towers
glaciation

Farnham

Endorse
insignia worn

ITC Charter

Structure
& formatting

Romain BP

Informal Fonts

Sturdy serifs and a relatively low stroke contrast invoke a more informal atmosphere. Clarendon is the most obvious candidate, but there are others from this category that work equally well.

RePublic

Designed in 1955 for the Czech State Department, Public was a newspaper typeface linked to Communism. Tomáš Brousil rehabilitated this unique face as RePublic in 2004 and it has become popular in contemporary magazine design. While not technically a "Clarendon", RePublic is a square slab with a similarly informal but impactful effect.

Black & Grey friars
ORDER ENGAGE

Sutro

Jim Parkinson's interest in early slab serifs began in the 1970s when he drew a new version of Egiziano for Roger Black at New West Magazine. The versatile Sutro family has 19 members for text and headline use, adding a modern alternative to existing Clarendons.

Broker
golden fleece

Belizio

Biography
Periodical

Schadow

Technical Fonts

Unbracketed slab serifs in the Grotesk style play to Helvetica's calculated, technical impression. These faces are the most similar to Helvetica and often share very similar x-height and proportions for better mixing within the same block of text.

The
New
Liberal

Center

Illinois where the farmers were first thoroughly organized into clubs and began in Illinois in the sixties, had caused the new state constitution of railway charges. One of the acts passed by the Legislature of 1871 in an

Glypha

Adrian Frutiger's Univers is the most natural pair for Glypha, but Helvetica plays well with it too.

appearing
Derived

Helserif

treading
exactly

Serifa

arid spring
Carbons

Corporate E

magnetics
Gauged

Calvert

Classy Fonts

Want something more formal and austere? The elegant Didones of the late 18th century can make Helvetica feel quite upper crust.

16

SECTION VIII.

Of the Passions Which
Belong to Society

The other head under which I class our passions, is that of society.

1. *The society of the sexes,* which answers the purpose of propagation; and next, that more general society, which we have with men and

Walbaum

Walbaum is often forgotten among the more common Bodonis and Didots, but its lower stroke contrast makes it a better option for text sizes and its proportions are a better match for Helvetica.

ageless
Top to Bottom

ɪᴛᴄ Bodoni

through 9 to 5
Expand

ꜰꜰ Acanthus

Straightforward Fonts

No-nonsense newspaper serifs and bracketed Moderns echo Helvetica's just-the-facts-ma'am attitude.

DERIVATIVES & BIPARTISON INFLUENCE

· ·

REPORTER Jorge Gallanido

Standing by the old tavern and looking west, you see the line of ba
At your feet is a brook flowing from the southwest to the northeast,
and there is another smaller strean
joining its waters at the crossing of

U.S. Politics

Escrow

Escrow sets the tone of the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. A large family of text and display fonts in various widths, Escrow adds 44 striking options to the designer's palette.

Oceanography
Map of energy en route

Miller

reveals
FINDING

Ingeborg

Politicos
abscond

Centennial

Human Fonts

For a warmer, more friendly touch, choose an open Garalde or a typeface made for books. These are the most readable of the bunch, designed for long passages of text.

52°

PARTS OF THE WORLD

8.51 **Popular names.** Popular names of places, or epithets, are usually capitalized. Quotation marks are not needed. Some of the following examples may be used in more than one place. *None should be used in context where they will not be readily understood.*

Back Bay	the Eastern Shore	the Lake District
the Badger State	the East End	the Left Bank
the Badlands	the Eternal City	the Loop (Chicago)
the Bay Area	the Fertile Crescent	the Old World
the Beltway	the Gaza Strip	the Panhandle
the Bible Belt	the Gulf	the Promised Land
the Cape	the Holy City	the Rust Belt

Swift

Though it was designed at the end of the 1980s, Gerard Unger's most popular design doesn't look more than a day old. Its sharp serifs and open forms counter Helvetica's stoic posture to create a more contemporary feeling.

DAILY BULLETIN

Geneva

Plantin

Volcanic

cindering ash

Proforma

étranger

briefly gone

FF Parable

at weeks ending

Seaside

FF Milo Serif

Part 2: Alternatives

Alternatives to Helvetica

Introduction

There are many reasons why Helvetica is so widespread. The most obvious being that a few weights have been bundled with the Mac OS for years. It is arguably the most respectable of the "default" fonts. But it's also used because it's a safe, neutral choice. For many purposes, typography is more about content than style. Fans of Beatrice Warde will tell you that typographers should communicate without distraction. Helvetica, with its simple, unadorned forms, is the perfect crystal goblet. Even its ubiquity contributes to its neutrality — letters so common they become invisible.

But invisibility isn't always appropriate, particularly in advertising or branding where individuality is key. Here we recommend our favorite fonts from the grotesque genre that offer something different from Helvetica (or Arial) — whether it's style, warmth, or extra features like small caps, figure alternates, and additional widths.

Cool, Crisp, Clean

Much of Helvetica's appeal comes from its cold, almost clinical modernity. Here are some related sans serif fonts that exude that vibe.

Groteska

Univers™

Univers is widely considered Adrian Frutiger's masterpiece. Its 27 styles go from Ultra Condensed Thin to Extra Extended Black, but still give an impression of steadiness and homogeneity when combined.

Why it's not Helvetica

In some ways, even more spare (no beards or tails). Uniformity across a broad spectrum of styles.

Groteska

Heldustry™

In 1978, prolific photo type designer Phil Martin added "just the right touch of Eurostile's squareness" to Helvetica and created a new font for a cable TV news network.

Why it's not Helvetica

You've probably never seen it. And for those who are looking for something unique, that can be the most important characteristic.

Groteska

Paralucent™

The first text sans serif from Rian Hughes, a master of stylized display faces. It still shows signs of his distinctive hand, from the big round 'i' dots and wedge terminals to the daring lowercase 'g'. Paralucent was designed to be more consistent than Helvetica, and a solid modern workhorse of a font, elegant enough for headline and robust enough for text.

Why it's not Helvetica

A single-story 'a' and tailed 'l'. Vintage Deutsch cachet.

Groteska

Neuzeit S™

Wilhelm C. Pischner's Neuzeit Grotesk preceded Helvetica by more than 30 years. The more humanist Neuzeit S was introduced by Linotype-Hell AG in 1966, intended for large bodies of text.

Why it's not Helvetica

A gentle, almost Avenir-ish geometry.

Groteska

Maxima™

In 1990 Gerd Wunderlich revisited Univers and created this slightly more contemporary option.

Groteska

FF Schulbuch™

A series of fonts based on the historical textbook types used in Northern and Southern Germany, and Bavaria. The Nord (North) variant is the closest relative of Helvetica.

Why it's not Helvetica

A single-story 'a' and tailed 'l'. Vintage Deutsch cachet.

Getting Warmer

Helvetica is often classified as a "neo-grotesque". Here are some older grotesques marked by idiosyncrasies and irregularities. They feel warmer, less manufactured — better suited for delivering subject matter that requires a more handcrafted vehicle.

Groteska

Basic Commerical™

Appearing in hot metal at the turn of the 20th century, Basic Commercial (like Akzidenz-Grotesk®) is based on designs which influenced all the modern grotesques that followed. Basic Commercial was distributed for many years in the United States under the name Standard Series which is seen most notably in Massimo Vignelli's signage for the New York City subway.

Why it's not Helvetica

Angled stroke endings ('S', 'C', 'e') open up the counters and add life. Taller ascenders lend elegance.

Groteska

FF Bau™

Helvetica is cold and calculated, but its roots lie in much quirkier material. Its earliest direct ancestor was first introduced around 1880. Christian Schwartz updated the family for contemporary needs without rationalizing away the spirit and warmth of the original.

Why it's not Helvetica

A double-storey 'g'. Lowercase 'a' keeps its tail in all weights. Optional oldstyle figures.

Groteska

Folio™

Designed by Konrad F. Bauer and Walter Baum, and released in several weights and widths by the Bauer Type Foundry from 1956 to 1963.

Why it's not Helvetica

Delightfully irregular, a type that shows signs of rough cut metal.

Groteska

Venus™

Created in the early 1900s, Venus precedes Helvetica by many years. Some sources note that it was designed for German map production.

Why it's not Helvetica

Antique, not modernist. Very idiosyncratic for that vintage hot metal look.

Groteska

Monotype Grotesque™
A British type from the 1900s, MT Grotesque's ten very different styles read like a timeline of grots to come — Bell Gothic, Trade Gothic, Helvetica — but none of those match its warmth and character.

Why it's not Helvetica
Delightfully irregular, a type that shows signs of rough cut metal.

Groteska

ARS Region™
A brand new release from a brand new foundry, ARS Type, Region is Helvetica with trademark Shamal oddities.

Why it's not Helvetica
Would be cold and crisp if it weren't for the soft stroke connections on letters like the 'G', 't', and 'k'. A lowercase 'g' that takes FF Meta's lead. Small caps available.

Groteska

Adesso™
French designer Thierry Puyfoulhoux's rounded sans is the furthest from Helvetica on this list, but it's definitely soft and warm while maintaining the basic grotesque lettershapes

Groteska

Titling Gothic™

The newest family on our list is also the most extensive. FB Titling Gothic is an immense series of nearly fifty styles inspired by that century-old favorite ATF Railroad Gothic (see also: Wilma).

Why it's not Helvetica

Every possible width you could need for setting headlines. Antique, American flavor. Very little stroke modulation, even in heavy and wide styles.

The Timeless Classic

Despite all the substitutes, sometimes the old reliable is still the best bet. Neue Helvetica (German for "New") is the most complete & usable set of Helv. fonts.

Groteska

Neue Helvetica™

Despite all the substitutes, sometimes the old reliable is still the best bet. Neue Helvetica (German for "New") is the most complete and usable set of Helvetica fonts. Over the years, the Helvetica family was expanded to include many different weights, but these were not as well coordinated with each other as they might have been. In 1983, D. Stempel AG redesigned and digitized the "Neue Helvetica" typeface for Linotype and made it a self-contained font family.

FontShop Education

FontShop is more than a shop that sells fonts — we want to help you do great work too. Get more typography tips and tutorials at fontshop.com/education.

About FontShop

Founded by Erik Spiekermann and Neville Brody in 1989, FontShop is the original independent retailer of digital type. We offer more than 100,000 fonts from dozens of expert-selected foundries, including our house brand: FontFont.

Colophon

This document is set in
FF Meta
FF Meta Serif
FF Dingbats 2.0

Further Reading

- **FontShop Fundamentals 2**
  Alternatives to Helvetica

- **Erik Spiekermann's Typo Tips**

- **The Right Font for the Job**

- **Type Anatomy**

Online Resources

- **FontShop.com**

- **FontFeed.com**

- **Spiekermann.com**